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ABSTRACT

This issue is the last in a three-part series on teaching quality. The first examined the effectiveness of various approaches to recruiting, educating, and inducting teachers. This report discusses the school environment and role of teachers' working conditions in attracting and retaining good teachers, noting several disparate factors that collectively impact the working environment and the job of teaching. It uses current research, polls, and surveys to explore the relationship of these factors to teachers' working conditions. Research indicates that; improving parent involvement in schools can improve the working conditions of teachers and strengthen school communities); a good mix of teacher leadership and autonomy provides an atmosphere where teachers can focus on instruction and student achievement while participating in important school decisions; states' implementation of K-12 standards for students, along with new, standards-based assessment and accountability systems, has impacted teachers' daily work; ensuring school safety and eliminating violence contributes to overall school climate and working conditions; and class-size reduction is a popular reform, based on the assumption that lowering the teacher load gives teachers a better chance to succeed with their students. However, research suggests that student achievement may be served as well or better by addressing other teaching strategies. Selected research, readings, and Web sites are listed. (SM)

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EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

The Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001

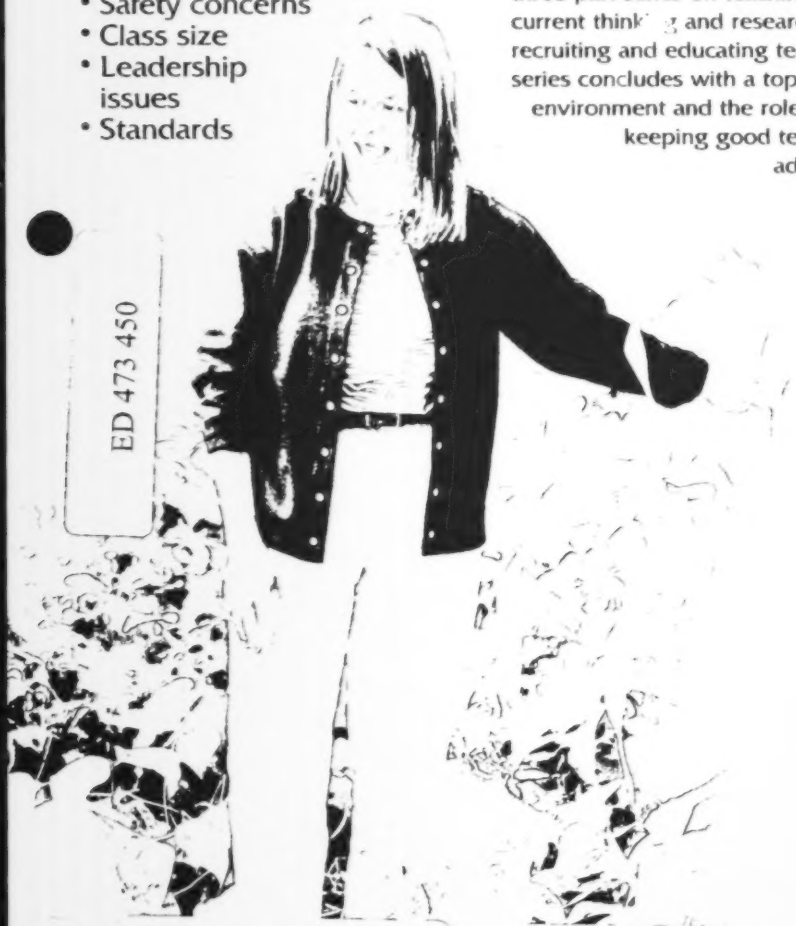
Teaching Quality

Vol. 2, No. 4, February-March 2001

What's Inside

How teachers' jobs are affected by:

- Parent involvement
- Safety concerns
- Class size
- Leadership issues
- Standards



Diverse Factors Affect Teachers' Work Environment

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001* is the final installment of a three-part series on teaching quality. The first two issues in this series focused on current thinking and research on the effectiveness of various approaches to recruiting and educating teachers and inducting them into the profession. The series concludes with a topic that has received little scholarly attention: the school environment and the role of teachers' working conditions in attracting and keeping good teachers. Are teachers safe and supported by parents and administrators? Are they clear about expectations? Do they have the tools to succeed?

Teaching takes place in the context of schools and is influenced by numerous factors that do not fall entirely within the teachers' control. The nature of this daily work is altered by education policy reforms such as standards and assessment or class-size reductions. Teachers' role in decisionmaking, and the support they receive or don't receive from parents also affect how teachers function, and how satisfied they are. In addition, the issue of how safe is the school also helps determine whether the school environment is conducive to teaching.

This final issue on teaching quality focuses on these somewhat disparate factors that collectively have a substantial impact on the working environment and the job of teaching. It relies on current research as well as polls and surveys to explore the relationship of the following topics to teachers' working conditions:

- Parent support
- School safety
- Class size
- School and teacher leadership
- Standards and assessments.

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Parent Support

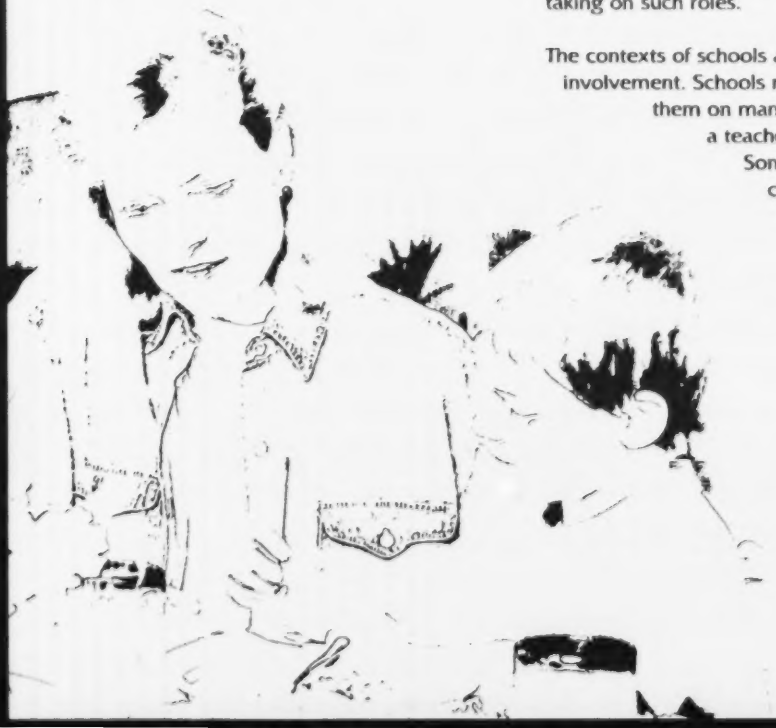
Parent support is widely accepted as a factor that contributes to the teaching and learning environment in schools. A collection of studies about parent support of schools, *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement*, reports that family support is an accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school to the extent that the family is able to (1) create a home environment that encourages learning, (2) express high expectations for their children's achievement and future careers, and (3) become involved in their children's education at school and in the community.

Henderson, Anne T., and Nancy Berla (1996). *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement.* National Committee for Citizens in Education.

Teachers depend on parents to make sure their children come to school each day ready to learn, to be available to help with their homework, and to monitor and promote their children's educational progress. Teachers also rely on parents to help instill self-discipline and other traits and habits conducive to learning. Finally, educators may look to parents to take an active part in the leadership and operation of the school, to be a resource for in-class and extracurricular activities or to provide supplemental financial support. Teachers' benefit from parent involvement is twofold: they get direct encouragement and higher student achievement, which reflects well on them and their school.

Recent surveys show that most teachers, however, do not think parents are involved enough in their children's education. Teachers in inner-city schools, in particular, do not feel supported. While four out of five suburban teachers report that parent support in their schools is either excellent or good, nearly two in three inner-city teachers describe it as fair or poor. Even so, the picture is improving. According to Metropolitan Life's 1998 report, *Survey of the American Teacher*, the percent of teachers who describe support from parents as excellent is up slightly from over 10 years ago, from 17% to 19%. The percent of teachers who rate parental support as good has increased from 40% to 44%.

Many parents are interested in getting more involved in schools, but may feel unwelcome or, in some cases, ill-prepared to take on certain roles. A 1998 report by the Public Agenda Foundation showed that most parents, for instance, are not comfortable being directly involved in management, academic or hiring decisions – as some education reform strategies envision. Similarly, few teachers approve of parents taking on such roles.



The contexts of schools and communities contribute to the complexities of parent involvement. Schools may create schoolwide bridges to parents, such as involving them on management teams, or more limited and specific overtures, such as a teacher asking parents to help with an at-home reading program. Some schools may discourage parent participation through changes in the school or a perception that some parents are over-involved and intrusive. Other barriers to parental involvement include lack of time on the part of school staff or parents, lack of staff training on how to work with parents, lack of parent education to help with schoolwork, cultural/socioeconomic and language differences between parents and staff, and parent and staff attitudes and concerns about safety in the surrounding neighborhood after school hours.

Research indicates that improving parent involvement in schools is a multifaceted challenge that requires the combined efforts of parents, teachers and administrators. The active support and participation of parents not only may improve working conditions for teachers, but also has the potential to strengthen school communities.

School and Teacher Leadership

Teachers are looking for the right combination of leadership and autonomy. A good mix provides an atmosphere where they can focus on instruction and student achievement, while participating in important decisions that affect their practice and professional growth. Administrative support and leadership, along with teacher autonomy, are highly associated with teacher satisfaction.

According to Metropolitan Life's *Survey of the American Teacher 2000*, however, 28% of middle- and high-school teachers feel alienated at their school, and 27% sense that what they think doesn't count for much. These feelings are not equally distributed among all teachers, though. Teachers whose schools are at least two-thirds minority and/or poor students are more likely to feel left out, a sense of disenfranchisement that isn't new. The same report noted that more than a decade ago, in 1988, three in 10 teachers reported feeling that their principals did not recognize and develop teachers' leadership potential by involving them in decisions about school organization and curriculum.

Public Agenda (2000). *A Sense of Calling: Who Teaches and Why.* http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/teachers/teachers.htm

A Sense of Calling: Who Teaches and Why, a 2000 report by Public Agenda, noted that new teachers voice admiration for school administrators who exercise quality control, carefully choose personnel and resist compromises. Other studies show that teachers want to play a greater role in decisionmaking, assuming both authority and responsibility and increasing their sense of professionalism. Teachers generally perceive that they have more control over classroom practices than they do over more global school issues such as disciplining students, deciding what is taught and selecting instructional materials. Teachers in small schools, those with fewer than 150 students, are more likely than those in larger schools to believe that they influence school policy. This research implies that teachers are interested in strong building leadership that includes them in decisionmaking processes.

A 1999 U.S. Department of Education policy forum emphasized the need for administrators to give teachers greater leadership roles. A report synthesizing the forum debate and discussion concluded that today's education reforms require principals to have new kinds of skills and knowledge, including recognizing and fostering good teaching, and employing a management style based on communication, collaboration and community building.

Research suggests that improving leadership at the school level, both by increasing principals' skills and knowledge and by creating more opportunities for teachers to be involved in school decisions, will increase teacher satisfaction.

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Standards and Assessments

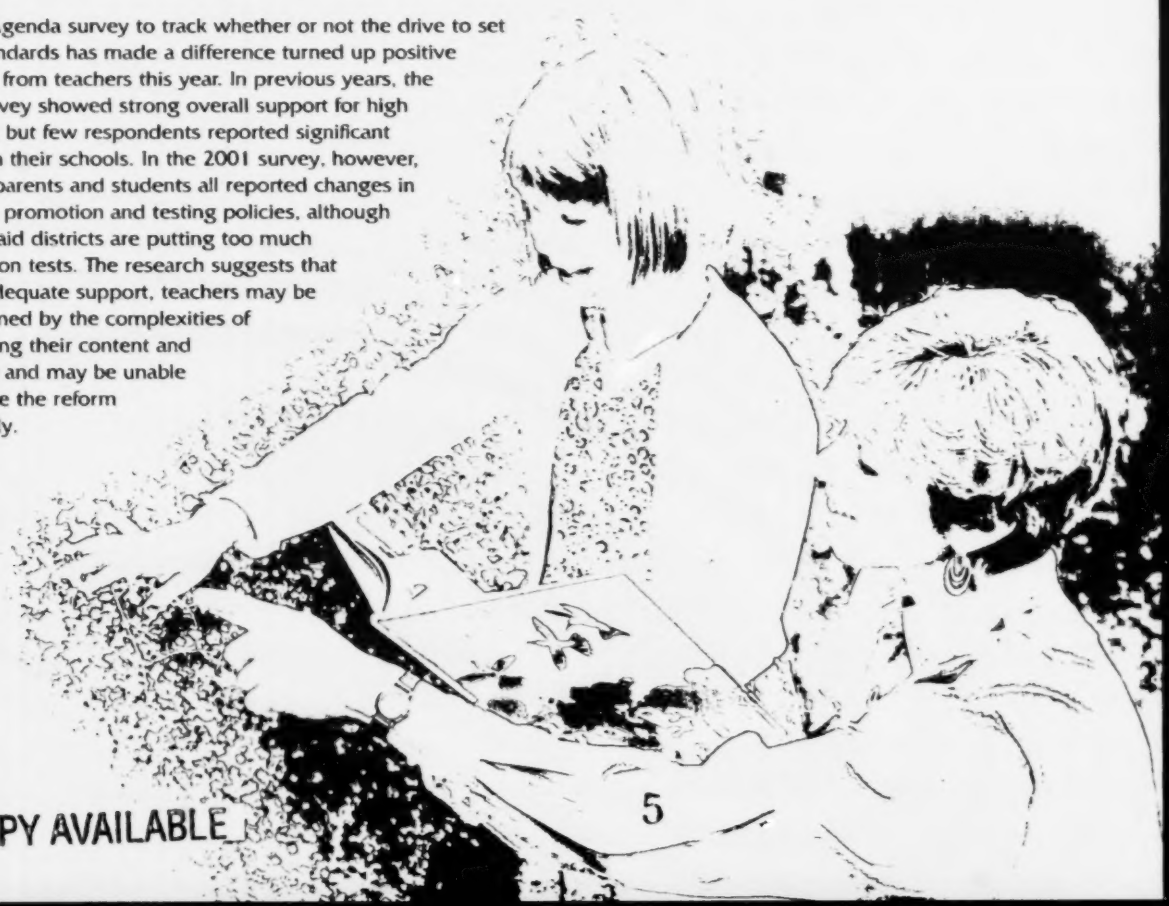
States' implementation of K-12 standards for students – along with new, standards-based assessment and accountability systems – has had an effect on teachers' daily work. These new policies typically require major adjustments in curriculum, and reallocation of time and resources. As teachers seek ways to implement standards, they continually exchange old practices for new. This practice can make for an invigorating and lively workplace, but only to the extent that schools and districts support teachers' need to learn new skills.

Teachers need time to understand content required by standards, time to master new techniques for implementing the standards, and both formal and informal opportunities to share and discuss concerns, problems and ideas. Additionally, materials that align with standards and professional development that helps teachers apply standards are necessary for effective implementation.

A 1997 Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) analysis of Philadelphia education reform highlights the challenges teachers face in implementing standards. The study found that despite the district's efforts to promote teachers' awareness and understanding of standards, and despite teachers' belief that standards can have a positive impact on student learning, the implementation process left teachers feeling dissatisfied, frustrated and confused. Teachers said they weren't sure what standards-driven classrooms could and should look like, didn't fully understand what was expected of them and their students, and were worried that accountability measures would be unfair. As a result, the implementation of standards varied widely from classroom to classroom and from school to school, even though many schools showed improvement.

Consortium for Policy Research in Education (1997). *Children Achieving: Philadelphia's Education Reform.* http://www.gse.upenn.edu/cpre/docs/resrch/children.html

A Public Agenda survey to track whether or not the drive to set higher standards has made a difference turned up positive responses from teachers this year. In previous years, the annual survey showed strong overall support for high standards, but few respondents reported significant changes in their schools. In the 2001 survey, however, teachers, parents and students all reported changes in academic, promotion and testing policies, although teachers said districts are putting too much emphasis on tests. The research suggests that without adequate support, teachers may be overwhelmed by the complexities of transforming their content and pedagogy and may be unable to embrace the reform successfully.



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School Safety

Violent incidents over the last decade have focused public attention on the vulnerability of teachers and students in schools. Ensuring safety and eliminating violent behavior contributes to overall school climate and working conditions.

Polls and surveys show that teachers and the public perceive schools to be less safe than in the past. Increasing percentages of public school teachers report that physical conflict and weapons possession are moderate or serious problems in their schools. Crimes committed against teachers vary in different types of schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the yearly average number of crimes committed against teachers between 1994 and 1998 was 83 crimes per 1,000 teachers. Middle- and high-school teachers were more likely to be victims of violent crimes and theft than elementary school teachers, and teachers in urban schools more likely than suburban or rural teachers. Even in an atmosphere of declining student victimization, teachers' experiences and perceptions of crime at school may take a personal toll and motivate them to leave the field.

Choy, Susan P. (1996). *Issues in Focus: Teachers' Working Conditions*. National Center for Education Statistics. http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsold/ce96/c96007.html

Class Size

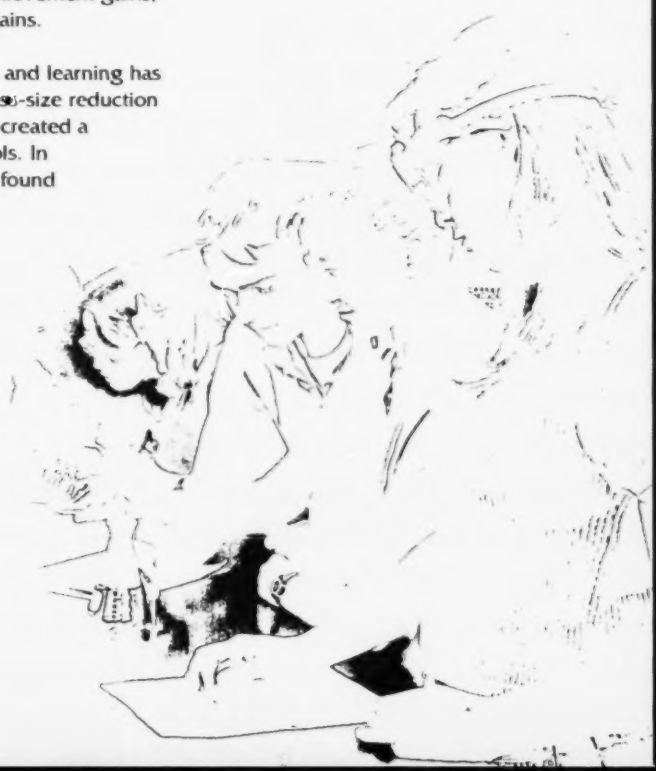
Class-size reduction is a popular reform across states, based partialiy on an assumption that lowering the teaching load gives teachers a better chance to succeed with their students. States have been implementing policies to reduce class size since the 1980s, mostly in grades K-3, and the federal government is providing funds to help states hire and train new teachers as part of an initiative to lower class sizes in the early grades.

According to a recent report by the Council of the Great City Schools, funds available under the federal class-size reduction program have become an "essential ingredient" in urban districts' efforts to accelerate student achievement gains, ensure quality teaching and improve low-performing schools. A report on Tennessee's Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio Project (Project STAR) found that students in small classes in the lower grades improved their achievement gains, with poor and African-American students having the greatest gains.

Mosteller, Frederick (1995, Summer/Fall). "The Tennessee Study of Class Size in the Early School Grades." *The Future of Children*, Vol. 5. http://www.futureofchildren.org/cri/08cri.htm

But research into the effects of class-size reduction on teaching and learning has not yielded definitive conclusions. In California, for instance, class-size reduction has produced small gains in student achievement, but also has created a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in hard-to-staff schools. In Wisconsin, an analysis of the state's class-size reduction efforts found that smaller classes had had a beneficial effect on a small population of students – namely, kindergarten students and black students – but that, overall, the cost of class-size reduction efforts may outweigh benefits. The study concluded that the state may be better off investing its money in other reform strategies, particularly those directed at improving the quality of teaching.

Research seems to indicate that while reducing class size may increase opportunities for teachers to work with and know individual students, student achievement may be served as well or better by addressing other teaching strategies. Teachers who would benefit from reduced class size also may benefit as much or more if resources were focused on the skills and knowledge needed to promote their teaching abilities.



Selected Research and Readings

The 1998 Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher
http://www.metlife.com/Companyinfo/Community/Found/Docs/ed.html

The 2000 Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher
http://www.metlife.com/Companyinfo/Community/Found/Docs/ed.html

Bank Street College (2000). *Small Schools: Great Strides, A Study of New Small Schools in Chicago.*
http://www.bnkst.edu/news/releases/smschool.html

Council of the Great City Schools (2000). *Reducing Class Size: A Smart Way To Improve America's Urban Schools.*
http://www.cgcs.org/reducingclasssize.pdf

Meier, Deborah (1996). "The Big Benefits of Smallness." *Educational Leadership*, Volume 54, Number 1.
http://www.ascd.org/readingroom/edlead/9609/meier.html

Ogawa, Rodney T. (1998). "Organizing Parent-Teacher Relations Around the Work of Teaching."
Peabody Journal of Education, Volume 73, Number 1.

Office of Educational Research and Improvement (1999). *Effective Leaders for Today's Schools: Synthesis of a Policy Forum on Educational Leadership.*
http://www.ed.gov/pubs/EffectiveLeaders/effective-leadership.html

Public Agenda (1998). *Playing Their Parts: What Parents and Teachers Really Mean by Parental Involvement.*
http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/parent/parent.htm

Public Agenda (2001). *Reality Check 2001.*
http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/rc2001/reality.htm

Raywid, Mary Anne (1999). *Current Literature on Small Schools: An ERIC Digest.*
http://www.ael.org/eric/digests/edorc988.htm

Web Sites

Education Commission of the States (ECS)
The Education Issues section of the ECS Web site has a variety of information on school safety, class-size reduction, leadership and teaching quality.
http://www.ecs.org

National Resource Center for Safe Schools
This organization works with schools, communities, and state and local education agencies to create safe learning environments and prevent school violence. Its Web site provides publications, facts and figures, recommended readings and links to other sites.
http://www.safetyzone.org

Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL)
IEL's mission is to help institutions and individuals work together across boundaries to improve the educational, social and personal development of children and youth.
http://www.iel.org

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